

DEVELOPING A CURRICULUM FOR NATIVE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

In response to frequent requests, the author here publishes an outline for one course in Native literature first presented in isolated areas. In the absence of adequate library resources, some of the materials were developed by the students themselves.

En réponse à de fréquentes demandes, l'auteur a publié ici un plan de cours pour un cours de littérature indienne premièrement présenté dans un endroit isolé. En absence de ressource littéraire librairie adéquate quelques uns des matériaux ont été développé par les étudiants eux-mêmes.

During my first five years with Brandon University, I had the unique experience of presenting university courses all over northern Manitoba. Most of these courses were taught on Indian Reserves to classes that consisted predominantly, sometimes exclusively, of Native students. Ordinarily, half of my teaching load in any given year consisted of my teaching a second-year Native Studies course called Native Literature. The first obstacle in presenting such a course was the general lack of works by Native writers. I wanted the emphasis in the course to be on writings by Native authors, not writings about Natives. As a result, I became a collector and preserver of writings by Natives on a great many diverse topics and in a variety of forms. Whenever possible, I utilized local materials or even writings by other students in order to amplify the published materials available. In the end, a course evolved that provided an introduction to the great variety of materials lumped together under the topic of Native Literature.

In *Studies in American Indian Literature* (Modern Language Association, New York, 1983), editor Paula Gunn Allen included a number of "course designs" in American Indian literature. These "designs" are quite useful as far as they go, but each is rather narrowly focussed on a single area of Native Literature; none attempts to survey the field as a whole. As well, the emphasis is clearly upon "American Indian" writers, in which writers of the American Southwest are most prevalent. In teaching Native Literature to Ojibway, Saulteaux, and Swampy Cree students, it was important to find materials from hunting cultures representing northern interests whenever possible. It is very difficult for northern Native students, who live in a world of snow and cold for most of the year, to understand the great emphasis on rain and drought that appears in so many Southwestern Native tales. As well, the mystique of the horse that appears in Plains culture is not immediately relevant to trappers and hunters whose ancestors travelled by dog sled and whose contemporary mode of transportation is the snowmobile.

The course that evolved, then, was a survey of the major forms of Native Literature with a special emphasis on northern Native Canadian writings whenever possible. It is not possible, however, to structure a course consisting entirely of this material, but it is becoming easier to plan a curriculum in which these materials predominate.

Here is an outline of the course as it has been taught, followed by definitions, descriptions and discussions of the materials in each section of the course.

NATIVE LITERATURE: COURSE OUTLINE

Part I: Folklore - Oral Literature

A. Introduction to the types of oral literature

Texts: Turner, Frederick W. III (Editor): *The Portable North American Indian Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978
Clay, Charles: *Swampy Cree Legends*. Bewdley, Ontario: Pine Ridge Publications, 1978

Thompson, Stith (Editor): *Tales of the North American Indians*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966

B. Native Oratory

Texts: Vanderwerth, W.C. (Editor): *Indian Oratory*. New York: Ballantine, 1971

Turner, Frederick W. III (Editor): *Portable North American Indian Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978

George, Chief Dan: *My Very Dear Good Friends*, in Waubageshig (Editor): *The Only Good Indian*, Toronto: New Press, 1970

Part II: Biography and Autobiography

A. "As Told To" Narratives

Tetlaneetsa in Kent Gooderharn (Editor): *I Am An Indian*. Toronto: I.M. Dent, 1969

Speare, Jean E. (Editor): *The Days of Augusta*, Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, 1973

Tetso, John: *Trapping is My Life* Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1970

B. Autobiography

Willis, Jane: *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, Toronto: New Press, 1975

Campbell, Maria: *Halfbreed*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1973

Redbird, Duke: *Red on White*. Toronto: New Press, 1971

Radin, Paul: *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 16:381-473

C. Biography

Thomspson, Chief Albert Edward: *Chief Peguis and His Descendants*. Winnipeg: Peguis, 1973

Spradley, James P. (Editor): *Guests Never Leave Hungary*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1969

Part III: Drama

A. Benedict, None, *The Dress*, in Waubageshig (Editor): *The Only Good Indian*. Toronto: New Press, 1970

Geiogamah, Hanay: *New Native American Drama: Three Plays*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980

Alexander, Hartley: *Manito Masks*. New York: Popular Library, 1975

Part IV: Fiction

A Short Stories:

Texts: Kenny, George: *Indians Don't Cry*, Toronto: Chimo, 1977
Johnson, Basil: *Moosemeat and Wild Rice*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978

Rosen, Ken: *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974

Selections in Turner, Frederick W. III (Editor): *The Portable North American Indian Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978

B. Novels:

- Momaday, N. Scott: *House Made of Dawn*. New York: Harper and Row 1966
- Silko, Leslie: *Ceremony*. New York: Viking, 1977
- Welch, James: *The Death of Jim Loney*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979
- Welch, James: *Winter in the Blood*. New York: Bantam, 1975

Part V: Poetry

A. Oral Poetry

- Texts: Rothenberg, Jerome (Editor): *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americans*. New York: Doubleday, 1972
- Colombo, John Robert: *Songs of the Indians*. Volume I, Ottawa: Oberon, 1983

B. Contemporary Poetry

- Texts: Niatum, Duane (Editor): *Carriers of the Dream Wheel: Contemporary Native American Poetry*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975
- Redbird, Duke: Selections in Waubageshig (Editor): *The Only Good Indian*. Toronto: New Press, 1970

PART I: ORAL LITERATURE

This part of the course provides an introduction to the great wealth of oral materials available. As Brandon University also offers a course in Oral Narratives, the focus on this material remains minimal here.

A. Classification of Oral Narratives:

Students were introduced to the classification system used by folklorists and a rudimentary definition of each of the major types of oral literature - myth, legend, märchen, etiological tale, fable, and fairy tale - was presented. As each of these is covered extensively in the Oral Narratives course, the etiological tale alone received emphasis. These "why" stories remain extremely popular in the north today and most students could remember examples of such tales from their own experience. In many cases etiology was combined with Trickster tales, as in the case of the popular Weesaykejek stories or "Whiskey-jack" tales. Even such overtly entertaining stories as these were taught on the basis of their cultural function. These seemingly simple tales provide information about the mores and values of the culture group from which they arise. As well, taboos and explanations of tribal customs are incorporated into these stories

when they are presented to children. Of particular interest is the way in which the world of nature receives a human face. Human errors, flaws and mischief are shared by various creatures in these tales, and the world is the way it is because of the actions of our human or animal brothers in the time of the beginnings.

Students were asked to collect or rewrite an etiological tale that they had heard. These are some examples which the students provided.

Thunder Woman
Retold by Elsie Letandre, Fairford, Manitoba

Once there lived three brothers, who were trappers and hunters. As the brothers returned each evening to their camp they found that a mysterious visitor had left a hat, meal, and firewood in their wigwams.

The brothers were baffled. They began to think of ways to meet or catch the visitor. They decided that the eldest brother would stay in camp to meet the mysterious visitor. The brother waited but no one came. The second eldest brother waited next, but to no avail. Then it was the youngest brother's turn to wait and watch. He waited patiently through the long day. Towards dusk he heard someone outside. To his surprise a very beautiful young woman came into the wigwam. She explained to the young brother that she was the Thunder Woman of the Heavens and that she wanted him to come with her to be her husband. He told her that he must first consult his brothers. She told him that she would return for the answer.

That evening when the older brothers returned, the youngest brother told them what had happened. They loved their young brother and did not want him to go, but if that is what he wanted they would let him go. They told him they would miss him.

When it was time for the young brother to depart, he explained to his brothers that they would never see him again but that they would hear him now and then.

"Listen to the Thunder People," he said, "when you hear the low clap, the low murmur, that will be my way of telling you that I'm happy in my new hunting grounds."

To this day, you can still hear the low clap when there is a thunder storm and a reminder that there is another happy hunting ground.

Why Dogs Sniff Each Other's Tails
Retold by Pauline Monroe, Norway House, Manitoba

Once upon a time a dog decided to give a party. Because he had some nice things in his place, the dog decided to take precautions.

When dogs get excited they sometimes sweep things off tables with their tails. To prevent this, he asked each dog to leave his tail at the door. All the dogs who had been invited came to the party. They had a great time dancing, drinking and eating.

While the party was going on, one of the dogs decided to have a little fun by calling "Fire." All the dogs got very excited and ran from the party. In their haste, each grabbed what he thought was his tail as he left. They put their tails back on when they got outside. They discovered very quickly that in the rush and confusion, each had grabbed the wrong one. So that is the reason that to this day dogs are constantly sniffing each other's tails. Each is searching for his own, lost since the party.

Why Porcupine Has Quills

Retold by Roba Kirkness, Split Lake, Manitoba

Long ago when the world was young, porcupines had no quills. One day when Porcupine was in the woods, Bear came along and wanted to eat him. But Porcupine climbed to the top of a Hawthorne tree and was safe. When climbing down, Porcupine noticed how the thorns pricked him. He had an idea and started to break off some of the branches of the Hawthorne and put them on his back.

Then he went into the woods and waited for Bear. When Bear sprang on Porcupine, the little animal just curled himself up in a ball. Bear had to go away for the thorns pricked him very much.

Wisakedjak (sic.) saw what happened. He called Porcupine to him and asked how he knew the trick. Porcupine replied that he is always in danger when Bear comes along and when he saw the thorns he decided to use them.

To help, Wisakedjak took some branches from the Hawthorne tree and pulled off bark until they were white. Then, he put some clay on the back of Porcupine, stuck the thorns in it, and made the whole a part of his skin. After he had done this, Wisakedjak sent Porcupine to go into the woods. Porcupine obeyed, and Wisakedjak hid himself behind a tree.

Soon Wolf came along and sprang on Porcupine, and then ran away howling in agony. The bear came along, but he did not dare go near Porcupine because he was afraid of those thorns. That is why all porcupines have quills today.

Why Rabbit Has a Short Tail

Retold by Mary Jane Flett, Split Lake, Manitoba

It happened one early winter morning, when the sky was bright

and cold. It was in the midst of the northern wilderness where all the furry animals meet one another.

A rabbit had a long tail like a squirrel. One day something strange happened to him. It happened because he got into a habit of teasing other animals, and always thought highly of himself. He was especially proud of his long, beautiful tail.

As he was hopping along the path, he met up with a lynx. The lynx asked him where he was going. The rabbit made a smart remark and replied, "I'm going down to Scowl Lake, a couple of miles from here."

The lynx watched the rabbit hopping away. As he was walking along, he came across a little creek and stood there for a moment, wondering whether he should tag along with the rabbit. As he stood there, he noticed his reflection. Suddenly he realized how his face was frowning and scowling. By this time he knew what the rabbit had meant when he said he was travelling to Scowl Lake.

Lynx got furious and started chasing after the rabbit. As he was running he got the idea that he would make the rabbit look more foolish than he did. When he saw rabbit he grabbed hold of his long, beautiful tail and did not let go until he had pulled it off. To this day, that is why the rabbit has a short bushy tail.

A reading of these simple tales reveals the closeness to nature and the humanization of nature on the part of the Native tellers. The first story, "Thunder Woman" is one of the few folktales to provide a benevolent face to the voice of thunder. Its benevolence would be of great comfort to children afraid of nature's awesome sounds. The story which attempts to inform the listener about certain characteristics in dogs is again a humanizing of a peculiarity one observes every day in the animal kingdom. The dogs' party behaviour is both humourous and gently instructional. The origin of the porcupine quills reveals the benevolent spirit of Wisakedjak (sic) who watches and continually works at perfecting his creation to the benefit of the weaker, but often wiser, creatures. Rabbit's short tail is a punishment for pride, a frequent theme in various etiological explanations.

In addition to providing their own examples, students also read widely in various collections of tales. They learned to compare and contrast the same tale as it appears in different Native cultures and to evaluate these stories on the basis of the cultural information provided.

B. Native Oratory

No discussion of oral literature and Native culture would be complete without some reference to Native oratory and the importance of the spoken word to Native cultures. Oratory can be regarded as a special kind of oral literature which developed out of the needs of the non-written culture of Natives. Through

oratory we can become aware of the special difficulties that arose when an oral culture confronted a culture of writings and had to communicate enduring agreements. In an oral tradition, words are significant; government business, traditional values, ceremonial assurances were all spoken and had to be remembered. Thus, Native speakers had a great reverence for the word, believing that words did not disappear when spoken but instead remained forever, to be reached by memory whenever required. The politicians and government agents with whom the Natives had to deal had an entirely different idea about words. Unless written down, words were only air and verbal contracts "weren't worth the paper they're written on."

Since words were so important to the Native orator, great care was taken in the choice of words. The precise word was selected and words also were chosen for the vividness of image they presented. Native orators utilized, as a result, many complex figures of speech, such as metonymy, metaphors, similes and oxymorons. Each of these figures of speech makes each word very condensed; it contains multiple meanings vividly imaged. The speeches of the great Native orators are usually brief and redundancies are avoided. There are several collections of Native oratory available. The literary quality of these speeches is such that they yield well to analyses of style, form and language.

In addition to the literary value of these speeches, a chronological reading of the speeches delivered at confrontational meetings with government representatives presents a vivid picture of the historical realities and cultural conflicts the Natives were facing. Natives were being asked for their land, and year after year they were driven farther westward by white settlers. The white audience heard the Natives speak again and again about their spiritual connection to their ancestral homelands, but the words fell upon deaf ears. The pain and sorrow revealed by the Native orators can be felt by modern readers with an intensity that is increased by our shame at what our ancestors did.

PART II: BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Biographies and Autobiographies are, by far, the most readily available of any type of Native literature. The books included on the course outline are, with one exception, by or about Canadian Natives. The one exception is Radin's *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*. This is, by far, the best-known "autobiography" and presents quite clearly the difficulties in presenting an "as-told-to" narrative as an autobiography. This work is an anthropological landmark but is much less authentic than the other autobiographies included here. The other books listed are representative of various Indian and Metis cultures across Canada and include a cross section of occupations and experiences as well.

There is still room for original research in this area. Many of the reserves in Canada have cultural centers and, particularly in areas where there is local control of education, encourage schoolchildren to gather the stories of their parents and grandparents. Some reserves make an attempt to publish this materi-

al in their own newspapers or in pamphlet form for curriculum enrichment, but most of it remains unedited and unknown beyond the reserve.

In an attempt to gather some of this material, I would ask students to write out the recollections of their parents or grandparents or write some particularly vivid recollection of their own. Joan Ferland's piece is such a reminiscence of her childhood in the area of the Duck Mountains of Manitoba. Although she is recalling a situation that took place only thirty some years ago, she speaks of a world we no longer know.

It is Only Memories
by: Joan Ferland

I remember so well the nights when I sat up watching the flames flicker in the coal oil lamp. Sometimes I sat at the table watching the light flicker while my Morn cleaned rabbits, made bannock, or did some mending. At other times, I watched the light flicker while listening to stories on the battery operated radio or stories my grandfather would tell.

In my mind I can still see the flame flicker in the coal oil lamp and hear the sparks crackling in the wood stove. I can still see the fireflies lighting up at night at the back of our house near the spruce bluff at the foot of the mountains.

I move my eyes away from the flickering lamp and they come to rest on the household items lined along the west wall. The door in the center opens to the right and swings outward. There is an old brown dresser with a cracked mirror just right of the door, and for a minute I watch the flame flicker in the mirror's reflection. My eyes then continue their search of the two-room house. In the northwest corner against the west wall the woodbox sits almost empty, while just three feet away, back from the north wall the fire in the cookstove is crackling and shooting off red sparks. My eyes come to rest on the dusty spiderweb in the partition that divides the house into two rooms. The partition is dusty at the top but smooth and shiny near table level. It has fingerprints from a child's hands and grease spots on it also. There are some pictures hanging on the walls. One picture has pink lettering with crumpled tin foil backing and a gold-coloured wooden frame; the words on it say: "There is nothing sweeter than a Mother." The other pictures are of family members and pictures from calendars and magazines.

An old wooden table with cracked green paint sits near the partition. It is covered with a white-embroidered table cloth that is stained in places. A wooden bench, made from rough lumber worn smooth sits between the table and the partition where I sit with my brother and sisters. There is a doorway that leads into the back room where we all sleep. There are only two win-

dows in the back room, one facing east and the other south. The curtains, made from rolled oats bags, cover the windows and a fire is burning in the heater. There are two big dressers stacked with clothes and more clothes hanging on the wall. In one corner a swing is extended over a bed where my babysister sleeps contentedly, slowly swinging back and forth. Just below the swing, the metal bed sits covered with a patch work quilt blanket similar to those on the other two beds which occupy the same room. My eyes roam the entire house and return to the flame flickering in the lamp.

The light is still flickering and I recall that day my father's sister came to visit. She brought all of her children when she came and we played outdoors. On this night, there was a full moon in a clear sky and the stars were shining brightly. We played tag and hide-and-seek in the cool, crisp air until it was very late, then we went in because it is time for bed. We will sleep on the floor so that my aunt and uncle can sleep on our bed. My dad sent my sister and I out for two arm-loads of straw from the tall, yellow stack shining brightly under the glow of the moon. I remember this so well because the straw was cool, but smelled so fresh and sweet. We spread the straw on the floor of the front room and covered it with patch work quilt blankets, then we lay down to sleep with my two cousins, who shared our bed. There were five of us girls sharing the bed, and we lay there talking and giggling until told to go to sleep.

Finally, all the other girls have fallen asleep except me. I was watching the stars through a crack in the curtain. As I was lying there I thought of how good and beautiful life will be when I grow up. Always in my thoughts and daydreams I wear a soft pink nylon dress that comes just above my knees and I am laughing, everything around me is ideal.

Looking in the flames, I can also remember the trips we made into town; they were exciting. My grandfather would put his best harnesses on his team of horses and hitch them to a trailer with rubber tires. We sat in the back on bundles of straw. Everyone was happy and laughing on the way into town. We traveled on a dirt road with trees on both sides until we reached the paved highway. My grandfather slowed down because the horses would shy away from the faster-moving cars. We reached the town and tied the horses up at the stockyards by the railroad tracks. There was the strong aroma of fresh manure because it is shipping day. We went over to the general store and each of us children were given a nickel for candy. My grandmother bought groceries then took us back to the stockyards where we had a picnic lunch. We spent the rest of the day there until it was time to go home. My grandfather and grandmother had been drinking and they argued

on the way home. But the day in town was too long and I drifted off to sleep.

I remember all of the families moving away from Indian Ridge, but I cannot remember why. My family was the last to move, and I recall feeling a great sadness as we drove from my childhood home. Somehow I felt things would never be the same again.

Today I can still see the flames flicker in the coal oil lamp, but now it is with a feeling of great loss, for I see it only in my mind.

PART III: DRAMA

It is very difficult to find drama written by Natives and therefore very tempting to include drama about Natives in the curriculum instead. George Ryga's plays, *Indian* and *The Ecstacy of Rita Joe*, are well known and appreciated by Native audiences. Indeed, a recent production of *The Ecstacy of Rita Joe* in Winnipeg was performed with an all-Native cast. However, we can look to the few published examples of plays by Native writers for authenticity. Nona Benedict's "The Dress," a one-act play, utilizes modern theatrical devices as she describes a range of Native characters in their reaction to the modern world. These characters include the Native who "sells out" his heritage and his people to the world of big business, the young worker and secretary who are attempting to assimilate, and a young girl whose concern for Native values is symbolized in the making of a traditional dress. Geiogamah's collection of plays comes from the American Southwest and dwells extensively on the alienation and despair of the Native characters. Alexander's *Manito Masks* is an attempt to provide frameworks for the theatrical improvisation of Native rituals and ceremonies. While not particularly useful as it stands, Alexander's book presents an example of an area of drama that might be explored. The myths and tales of Native cultures as oral literature were dramatized by the story teller as they were told. Some of these might be adapted quite readily into more contemporary dramatic form.

PART IV: FICTION

Of the four collections of short stories listed here, two are by Canadian Natives. George Kenney is from Northwestern Ontario and writes both about reserve life and about those who leave the reserve and attempt to assimilate into the life of the small towns there. Basil Johnson is well known for his work on the spiritual traditions of his people, *Ojibway Heritage*. His *Moosemeat and Wild Rice* is the only collection of stories by a Native author that focuses on the humor engendered by the confrontations between Natives and whites. These stories are engagingly funny as they look at the way in which Natives misunderstand whites and whites misunderstand Natives. Johnson has an especially keen ear for the absurdities engendered when white bureaucrats visit reserves to enforce governmental policies.

Kenneth Rosen's *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* was, to my knowledge, the first collection of stories by Native authors. Rosen gathered his stories entirely from the American Southwest. The book has become a classic as it includes the first published works of Leslie Silko and Simon Ortiz. It is worth teaching for Silko's "Yellow Woman" story alone.

Of the four novels listed here, none is by a Canadian author. These four works are all by contemporary Native American authors who are becoming better known to the literary audience each year by virtue of the great many essays being written about them in scholarly journals. Although written about different Native culture, each of these novels is remarkably similar to the others in theme and tone. Each describes a young protagonist who has been away and returns to his home reserve. Each protagonist is alienated both from his cultural roots and from the white world in which he has been living. In each case, healing and regeneration can only occur when the protagonist comes to understand the relevance of Native culture to the contemporary world. As yet, no Native Canadian novelist has come forward with the power and authenticity of a Momaday, Welch or Silko.

PART V: POETRY

It is now relatively easy to find materials with which to teach this part of the course. There are two collections of traditional oral poetry and an excellent collection of poems by contemporary Native poets. Duane Niatum's collection is so good that it puts the efforts of Duke Redbird and other Canadians in the background. Above all, Pauline Johnson's attempts can now be relegated to the Sunday supplements of local newspapers. As well, each of the major anthologies of Native literature includes a large section of traditional and contemporary poetry. Special note should be made of the fact that two of the novelists mentioned previously have published volumes of poetry as well. N. Scott Momaday and James Welch have each published several volumes of the very finest contemporary poetry.

These, then, are my suggestions for developing a curriculum in Native literature. My emphasis is on the word developing, as the field is growing rapidly and there is, as yet, no firm canon of authors that must be included. Teaching Native literature has been especially rewarding at Brandon University because one can encourage the Native voices in one's own classroom to speak. For those teaching in more traditional settings, I would urge you to seek authentic materials by Native authors. The search is difficult, but it is time we listened to these Native authors and learned from them instead of imposing our own visions and structures upon their lives and work.